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A primitivist response to Andrew Flood's question: Is primitivism realistic?

Nihilo Zero

2010

The following is a response to an article written some time back by Andrew Flood (hereafter often referred to as "the author"). The article is in circulation again on one of the social networking/bookmarking/link-sharing sites (reddit.com) which I peruse. Although this response is somewhat late, I feel it's still relevant and will remain so. I should also point out that I do not primarily identify myself as a Primitivist, but I do see much worth in the ideas of anarcho-primitivism. My response starts and continues by taking on quoted statements made in the original work by Andrew Flood: Is primitivism realistic? An anarchist reply to John Zerzan and others.

Since when was the "basic purpose" of anarchism "the creation of a free mass society?" And if that was the simplified basic purpose, why does it have to remain so? Maybe these are word games the author is playing, but a free society doesn't necessarily have to be a "mass" society and I personally could see complications arising in a mass society that was too large.

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This would be especially true if the mass society was constantly encroaching on bioregions and cultures that could not survive the intrusion. **What does freedom really mean if your version of mass industrialism imposes itself as far and as densely populated as possible?** More to do with “faith than reality” indeed.

The author writes: “agriculture allows us to get vastly greater quantities of food from a given area.” But not only may this not be true — considering the long-term reduction of fertility and desertification that has accompanied agriculture from its earliest stages — but why must human food production rise to the level of sustaining “a mass society” be necessary in order to achieve human happiness and freedom? On the contrary, that has not been the effect of agriculture. Hundreds of millions starve today at the height of this system and how many more are veritably enslaved whether they are guiding the ox plow or creating the industrial machinery to till the soil? Simplistic understanding (and I daresay ignorance) of primitive cultures would have us believing that as large of a percent of their societies were starving as are currently starving under agricultural dominance in the world today. The fact is... small primitive tribes had an abundance and diversity of food which simply doesn't exist today.

Ironically, the author writes: “Large sections of the anarchist movement seem to have forgotten that the goal of anarchism is to change the world, not simply to provide a critique of the left or be a minor thorn in the side of the state.” Not only does this not necessarily jive with the aforementioned “basic purpose of anarchism,” but it also overlooks the fact that it is the primitivists who are actually trying to change the world (back into a sustainable livable place) and are offering the most fundamental critique! To the extent that any other so-called anarchists want to prop up techno-industrial mass society, they find themselves right in line with the fundamentally predominant philosophy of the society which they propose challenging.

tention because Flood seems to believe that we can engineer our collective way out of any crisis despite the fact that the overwhelming effects of our engineering has brought us the crisis! And simple replacements for the current resources are not at all guaranteed to manifest. It is quite possible that we have essentially spent and wasted the most efficient non-renewable resources which have now been strip-mined and burnt up. I would strongly suggest reading a recent article from Energy Bulletin entitled *Life After Growth*.¹

Flood's piece concludes with this statement: "Primitivism offers no hope and no program for a revolutionary change of society." On the contrary, primitivism offers much hope in positing a sustainable form of society that has existed, and continues to exist, and which may exist in broader form again. In terms of "a revolutionary program for change," we can largely join forces with those who are still trying to preserve their cultures while trying to put a stop to further destruction of the land. These struggles exist in many parts of the world and can manifest in many others still. As hackneyed and incomplete as it is, I myself have put forth an article outlining how I could see a broader Primitivist movement taking root in the United States (but I by no means claim that it is definitive or ideologically pure and unassailable, it's merely a basic starting outline for a Primitivist project).²

So, this is where it stands, I will be more than happy to see a response from Flood or any others along these lines. It is quite possible that I have overstated and understated things in this response but I have tried to be intellectually honest and I hope others will be as well, from now on, when discussing these subjects. I will be more than happy to defend, or concede, any statements I've made in this response.

¹ www.energybulletin.net

² www.anarchistnews.org

Regarding the authors interpretation of Aragorn's comment in the "Is Primitivism Realistic?" section... I think that many casual readers, regardless of their philosophical angle, will see that Aragon's statement is obfuscated or misunderstood by the author. Even out of context one can see that the point wasn't that implementation of primitivism may or may not be bizarre but, rather, that we should not be deterred because some others may see our goals as "unrealistic." Who cares if some people see freeing slaves and protecting biodiversity as unrealistic or bizarre?! I thought the point was supposed to be changing the world while offering a critique of the left and being a thorn in the side of the state?

It seems to me that the author is suggesting that Primitivists dream too big. But, at the same time, the author seems to not recognize the actual nightmare that has presented itself as the height of civilization.

As for the "core issue" of population... what the author and numerous others fail to recognize is that civilization is unsustainable. The widespread practices of agriculture and the petrochemical driven "green revolution" are unsustainable. Those things, combined with the waste of consumerism and the use of civilized weapons of war will, in all reasonable likelihood, lead to a collapse in the human population. Whether this is a hard landing (with a sudden and unpleasant reduction) or a soft-landing (with people voluntarily reducing their numbers while creating more sustainable ways of life) is irrelevant in this context. Civilization is unsustainable and a population crash of it's own design is all but inevitable. It doesn't matter if we like it or not, a reduction in population is a probable reality that should be considered by all those who are interested in preserving life and freedom on this planet. But it is not necessarily up to the Primitivists to decide how this will come about and, really, they have little to do with it. The population crash stands on its own not as an idealized concept or even necessarily as an actionable thing but, rather, as an impending reality.

This has to do with basic biology, not a philosophical hope or a revolutionary practice. We, as humans in general, have expanded too far and wide while using up our agricultural petrochemicals. Deforestation and desertification spreads. We have largely fished out the oceans and continue to pollute anything and everything. Surprise... this is not sustainable and the artificially increased population that came along with the features of civilization will, inevitably, crash. I reiterate that this, in particular, has little to do with what primitivists may want or do. Basically, in short, the author's "core issue" is almost the epitome of a red herring.

Then... when John Zerzan's reply is quoted, his words are ridiculously interpreted by the author. When JZ writes that "population is hardly a given" he's obviously not suggesting that there may actually be no human population! What he's suggesting is that the size of the human population is not necessarily, *a priori*, given to be a certain size simply because we exist as a species. Again... I believe that even a casual reader would be able to spot this misinterpretation no matter how out of context it may be.

For Flood to then accuse Zerzan of taking him out of context and creating a red herring seems utterly ridiculous! Projection anyone?!

I must say that I disagree with Zerzan regarding population decline as quoted: "I do not know anyone who says this could happen overnight..." Well, allow me to introduce myself! I'm not saying this will happen, but civilized society, with all its science and "advancements," has brought us to the age when we are always living on the cusp of veritable extinction! In western society the most intellectual people are rocket scientists and nuclear engineers. When they get together, as they have, the whole world is endangered. It's a nice quaint thought that no politicians or military leaders would ever do anything uncouth with their most powerful weapons. But I think even a cursory look at history will show that the violent insanity of prominent

espoused by any Primitivist is key or essential to all Primitivist philosophy in general.

When Flood gets to his thoughts on "class conflict," we get some core differences between he and the Primitivists. In the second paragraph of the "class conflict" section he states his belief that "capitalism is very much more adaptable than this" insomuch that it is unlikely that any "crisis will somehow creep up on the ruling class." He goes on to cite the apparent efforts major industries are using to adapt to the coming energy crisis (which he contradictorily admits is largely greenwashing). He goes on to explain: "This is the way capitalism works – crisis are opportunities for new investment..." But he can't seem to fathom the idea that a crisis of techno-industrial capitalism's own making will quite possibly undermine it. He talks about how capitalist processes "almost entirely wiped out the indigenous people of the America's" but he fails to see that it was driven primarily by the urge to consume and progress technologically. If you want farmland to feed the masses and the resources to construct all the nifty gadgets they want... it doesn't matter if you are an industrial capitalist or an industrial anarchist. The fact of the matter is that groups of people want the land preserved (or returned) in the natural form it existed. As soon as you start polluting and terraforming the environmental commons, even for the supposedly good purposes of agriculture, you are going to create conflict with those who feel it, the land and the biosphere, has a right and a common need to exist largely as it is.

This creates an imposition on the lifestyles and beliefs of people who may be smaller in number but who may also have an equally valid (or more ideal) way of life. And this is by no means a minor issue. What rights would techno-industrial anarchists claim to continue polluting and mining and irradiating the environmental commons? Where do you draw the line? And remember that you can't just wish away pollution or wish for more easily acquired resources. This is another point of con-

think this new article is offering much along any lines showing any true understanding of what a real primitivist critique of technology is. For the time being, I will limit myself, for the benefit of others, to suggesting a few articles on the subject for their consideration...

- *Technology* by John Zerzan
- *Division of Labor* by John Zerzan
- *Technophilia, An Infantile Disorder* by Bob Black

And, if you're really bold you might want to check out some Herbert Marcuse or Jacques Ellul. There is a lot of work out there which seriously questions and challenges the common and simplistic understanding of technology.

Moving on to "the odder stuff," Flood decides to highlight some of the various opinions he has received as comments which he deems "of much lesser importance." One might even wonder why he even includes the sentiments of random "Primitivists" at all but then... that serves to discredit Primitivism as a whole with a sort of *dicto simpliciter* attack. It is worth noting, in this "odder stuff" section, that he calls all existing primitive peoples "speciesist" because they hunt animals.

When he gets to his thoughts about abstract or symbolic thought, Flood answers his own question: "who cares?" It needs to be stated here that Zerzan's thoughts on the subject do not sum up the agreed upon opinion of all Primitivists. Zerzan's thoughts on the subject are interesting and may have some philosophical worth, but Flood brings them up in his response for little more purpose than I am now. I will say that there are some interesting psychological and cultural implications in regard to increasingly using representations of reality rather than dealing directly with what is being represented. This does not mean that each and every idea

civilized leaders has not swayed them from the most egregious atrocities of war. The most powerful weapons of war are being "improved" and spread to more and more modern societies. I'm not saying it will happen, but it seems like only a matter of time before someone like Andrew Jackson, Genghis Khan, Hitler, or Pol Pot gets a hold of these weapons — and uses them. This could, quite conceivably, cause a chain reaction of ill-thought reprisals. And if I may contradict myself a little bit without it being taken out of context, I think primitivists ought to have some thoughts about preventing the spread of these hi-tech weapons and stopping them from falling into anyone's hands. I'd even advocate a bit of reformism along these lines if I had to or if I thought it would amount to anything.

Now again... I don't want to pretend that there is a great disagreement between myself and Zerzan on the issue of population decline, and I suspect he may have been talking about more idealized forms of population reduction. If I had to guess, I'd wager he might even agree with me on the unfortunate likelihood of civilized leaders taking us all down with them. My only purpose of getting into all this was to show the red herring created by Flood on the issue of population reduction. Most primitivists are not advocating a violent and sudden decline in the human population brought about by their actions.

To try and sum up the anarcho-primitivist position on population reduction, let me say this: Mass numbers of people are not necessarily ideal, the society they exist within is not necessarily ideal, and the related branches of science and development within civilized societies has brought about widespread destruction and is ecologically unsustainable. Ergo, the population created by mass civilized society is unsustainable and will decline — one way or another, like it or not. In geological terms this is certain to be true but I think Zerzan may definitely be on to something when he refers to the next few decades as being critical.

As for “The centrality of the agricultural revolution” which the author Flood apparently wants to preserve and expand, I’d point out that there are Primitive societies that do still exist on the fringes and that these people might be both admired and worthy of preservation. They may even offer something worthy of emulation. Imagine that. So, if Flood wants to preserve “the agricultural technology of the last 100 odd years,” he needs to acknowledge the related deforestation and desertification which has impeded upon the lives and freedoms of primitive tribes that still existed during the process. If he’s arguing that the novelty of techno-industrial creations are worth preserving, he should recognize the destruction brought about by these things and then balance that with however many people may, unfortunately, want to have these things as well. I’m saying, even if possible, that it would be destructive, and in some cases authoritarian, to continue the practices and trends of techno-industrial civilization over the last 100 years which he has defended. Indeed, “Agriculture also seems a very logical starting point because agriculture is what makes a mass society possible.”

When Flood makes claims like this one: “Hunter-gathers can’t gather in large groups for a long period because they exhaust local food sources,” I feel that he is falling into the lines of a discredited version of anthropology. The myth of primitive tribes suffering from great scarcity was one perpetuated by early Americans who were justifying genocide. And the fact of the matter is that in modern times nearly one billion people go hungry every year! On top of all the other problems associated with agriculture, people aren’t even getting fed! And this was not the case with pre-agricultural primitive tribes, regardless of discredited statements to the contrary. So what is Flood defending?! The agricultural revolution and the preference of the civilized society over those who were happily leading primitive and sustainable lives?

Is primitivism a branch of anarchism? While I appreciate and admire both Kropotkin and Bakunin, I do not necessarily believe they are correct in all things or that their 150 year old statements still definitively define what anarchism is. Specifically... I suggest that this quote from Bakunin smacks of ignorance and, potentially, racism: “primitive men enjoying absolute liberty only in isolation are antisocial by nature. When forced to associate they destroy each other’s freedom.” Perhaps the operative word here is “forced” since most of their conflicts and hardships occur when the practices of civilized societies encroach upon them.

So one can talk about how “from the beginning” anarchism has been opposed to primitivism but really we are talking about how early anarchist philosophers had flaws and sometimes a faulty basis for their statements. Certainly two historic paragraphs don’t adequately carry the argument and even entire volumes by these two anarchist icons shouldn’t necessarily be accepted as some sort of unassailable anarchist wisdom.

To then try and compare Primitivists with President Bush makes Flood’s piece something to laugh out loud at! AND, ironically, like Bush, it is Flood who fails to recognize that “elsewhere on the planet people already organise their lives in ways that have a much lower energy demand.” In particular... he is ignoring and dismissing the people who have led and continue to lead primitivist lifestyles despite the encroaching destruction brought about by civilization.

As for Flood’s treatment of technology, I don’t know where to begin. I don’t think Flood is comprehending the primitivist critique adequately and I’m not sure it’s worth expanding on the subject here as it requires a powerful logic and an intellectual honesty which I feel Flood has failed to demonstrate. In the beginning of his fourth paragraph under the “technology” section, after he expounds pointlessly and cites criticism, he himself states: “These misunderstandings are probably my fault for stating the case too crudely in the original.” I also don’t